

(( ( PREACHING *the* WORD )) )

# THE SONG OF SOLOMON

*An* INVITATION  
*to* INTIMACY



**DOUGLAS SEAN O'DONNELL**

R. Kent Hughes

*Series Editor*

“Doug O’Donnell is becoming one of the most edifying pastors of our time. I heartily recommend this wise and winsome set of comments on a biblical book beloved by many Christians through the ages but sorely neglected in the present. May God use this commentary to renew the courage of pastors in preaching the Song of Solomon once again.”

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**Nancy Guthrie**, author, Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament Bible study series

“Our culture treats sex as an idol and the church often treats it as a taboo, rarely talking about it. This situation is a formula for disaster. We need more preaching and teaching in our churches, and the Song of Songs is an essential biblical resource that God has given us to lead us toward a godly theology and holy practice of sexuality. Doug O’Donnell has given us a profound, rich, and witty reflection on the Song that will encourage depth of understanding and motivation for right thinking and behavior. I recommend this book enthusiastically for everyone, but particularly for those who preach and teach the book in a church context.”

**Tremper Longman III**, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies, Westmont College

“Doug O’Donnell unfolds the Song of Solomon with personal and pastoral delight—and with attention to the poetic text and the biblical context. Into his exposition are woven warm-hearted exhortations, rich literary allusions, and a great deal of wit. This volume helps us celebrate the Bible’s celebration of married love.”

**Kathleen B. Nielson**, Director of Women’s Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; author and speaker, *Living Word Bible studies*

“Simply brilliant! This is the book on the Song of Solomon I’ve been waiting for—funny, moving, powerful, provocative, rigorously faithful to the text, and utterly Christ-centered. Doug O’Donnell explains and applies this trickiest of books in a way which is always fresh, responsible, and captivating. As you read, you will be delighted and deeply challenged, and you will gasp at the incredible intimacy which God gives to his people, both in marriage and in knowing him forever. I know of no more helpful work on the Song of Solomon.”

**J. Gary Millar**, Principal, Queensland Theological College; author, *Now Choose Life*

“How absolutely refreshing, challenging, and affirming is Pastor O’Donnell’s in-depth study of this love song—this Middle Eastern, centuries-old, wedding song celebrating the truly free love between a man and a woman in marriage. It is God’s provision to sustain loving marriages and renew loveless ones. This Song was written to give wisdom to the unmarried to wait and to give the married the wisdom to warm up to each other again and again. Pastor O’Donnell lays down his own soul and writes in places, not only expositively but also experientially, and the reader gasps. Here is a man who is as tender and as bold as the author of the Song of Songs. So with testimony and Biblical insight we are wonderfully led to the gospel, to God-breathed love that changes everything.”

**Wendell Hawley**, Pastor emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois; author, *A Pastor Prays for His People*

“Douglas O’Donnell has a special gift in integrating careful exegesis, poetic sensitivity, theological reflection, and relevant application, all seasoned with vivid language and winsome humor. His commentary on the Song of Solomon opens up the richness of this delightful book, which unfortunately is too little preached and too little understood today.”

**Daniel J. Estes**, Distinguished Professor of Old Testament, Cedarville University

*Song of Solomon*

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# A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases, and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never perfectly embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

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affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but he does.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you preach the Word may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

*R. Kent Hughes*



# Preface

When Kent Hughes asked me to write this commentary, I had mixed feelings. I was, of course, very honored. What an honor to be a part of the Preaching the Word series, and what an honor to be trusted with this tricky text and its touchy themes. But I was also humbled. For how does one preach through a book in which every section raises structural questions, every phrase has philological complexities, and every verse contains metaphors that leap like seven young stags in seven different directions (metaphorically speaking, of course)? And how does one show the bones of a text (poetic structure, parallelisms, etc.), yet leave enough flesh for the text to remain warm and stay alive? At times I wished I'd been assigned a more scientific commentary, where I could dissect, to the best of my ability, each exegetical issue; other times I wished I'd been given a brush and paint (God knows I can't paint, but if I could) and had been asked to capture the essence of each beautiful scene. But in the end I have done all I could do. Lord willing, I have mixed science with art adequately enough for you to hear something of each individual note without losing the cadence, tune, and voice of Solomon's greatest song.

The extensive endnotes were necessary, I felt, both to explain more fully how and why I reached my conclusions and to acknowledge the scholars whose shoulders I gratefully and gleefully climbed upon to complete this work. Obviously the men cited most often are those I deemed most helpful. Buy their work. Support their labors.

I would be remiss if I did not thank Emily Gerdts for her proofreading and formatting of the manuscript and Matt Newkirk for his careful and skillful editing of it. I also thank New Covenant Church for eagerly receiving the Word of God opened and taught each week. These sermons were a joy to preach to you!

Lastly but firstly, I acknowledge my dear wife, Emily. This book is not dedicated to you out of necessity (who else does a married man dedicate a commentary on the Song of Solomon to but his wife?), but out of sincere and deep love. I am both honored and humbled to be your husband.

*Douglas O'Donnell*  
St. Valentine's Day, 2011



# 1

## Understandest Thou What Thou Readest?

THE SONG OF SOLOMON 1:1

*The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's.*

1:1



UNDERSTANDEST THOU WHAT THOU READEST? is the King James version of Acts 8:30b.

Acts 8:26–39 tells the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. In the middle of that story, the evangelist Philip overhears this man reading from the prophet Isaiah:

Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter  
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth. (Acts 8:32, 33, quoting  
Isaiah 53:7, 8)

Philip asked him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (v. 30), or as the King James Version phrases it, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” The eunuch replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?”<sup>1</sup>

Like the book of Isaiah, the Song of Solomon (or the Song of Songs, as I will call it throughout this commentary) can be a difficult book to comprehend. The ninth-century Jewish rabbi Saadia likened the Song to “a lock for which the key had been lost.”<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth-century German Lutheran

Hebraist Franz Delitzsch wrote, “The *Song* is the most obscure book of the Old Testament. Whatever principle of interpretation one may adopt, there always remains a number of inexplicable passages.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, Marvin Pope comments, “[N]o composition of comparable size in world literature has provoked and inspired such a volume and variety of comment and interpretation as the biblical Song of Songs.”<sup>4</sup> Daniel Estes adds, “Scholars vary widely on nearly every part of its interpretation. . . . Virtually every verse presents challenges in text, philology, image, grammar or structure.”<sup>5</sup>

My favorite example of perspicuity angst comes from Christopher W. Mitchell, who begins his commentary, published in 2003, by reviewing the history of his study of the Song: “My fascination with the Song of Songs began in 1978 . . . when I took a graduate class on its Hebrew text at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. That fascination grew under the tutelage of my doctoral advisor, Professor Michael V. Fox.” Mitchell goes on to talk about how he has read commentaries and articles, preached and taught, and since 1992 worked earnestly on his 1,300-page commentary on the Song. He has worked almost thirty years on the Song, but then he writes in his preface about his desire to spend another decade to “delve more deeply into . . . this most difficult book of sacred Scripture.”<sup>6</sup>

Scholars who disagree on much of the Song all agree it’s a tough text. Thus the need for a guide to uncoil its complexities, solve its riddles, and find that lost key to unlock its door. In this first study I seek to offer some basic directions to help us navigate through the often dark (but so beautiful) waters of Solomon’s Song. By means of setting four guideposts in place, I hope to open God’s Word, as Philip did, and “beginning with this Scripture,” teach you “the good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35), revealing to you something of the meaning of the “mystery” of marriage (Ephesians 5:32).

Guidepost One: This Is a Song . . .

We start with the first guidepost: *This is a song*.

Our text begins, “The Song . . .” (1:1a). The significance of this simple observation is that it identifies the genre. This is not a letter, gospel, law book, prophecy, or apocalyptic revelation. This is a song. And a song (this is what I’ve learned after many years of study) is written to be sung. (Aren’t you glad I’m your guide?)

Perhaps this Song was originally written to be sung during the seven-day marriage festival.<sup>7</sup> We know that Israelite wedding celebrations lasted this long from Genesis 29:27 and Judges 14:12 and from extra-Biblical Jewish history; and we know from Jeremiah that singing was part of these

festivities—“the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride” (Jeremiah 7:34).<sup>8</sup>

Thus, following the lead of Duane Garrett,<sup>9</sup> I envision the following scenario: Just as there were professional singers and musicians for temple worship (e.g., 2 Chronicles 29:28), so I envision professional singers and musicians poised to sing and play for these week-long weddings. And each day as the bride and groom come out of their chambers, the wine is served, the music begins, and the singers sing. The soprano starts, “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine” (1:2). Then, over the sweet strum of the harp, the tenor softly serenades, “Behold, you are beautiful, my love” (1:15). And throughout the song, as the soprano and tenor call back and forth, from time to time other voices join in—like a chorus in a Greek play or a choir in an oratorio. These voices are comprised of the young maidens, “the daughters of Jerusalem” as our text calls them.

That’s what I envision day after day for *seven* days, a *perfect* celebration of the new creation of man and wife as one. Whether or not you envision precisely what I envision matters little. What matters most is that you see the Song as a song, which means music and singing and implies some sort of public celebration.

This also means that this song is not primarily intended to be preached in church or taught in a classroom, but to be sung; and the fact that we don’t sing it (or some paraphrase of it) is only to our shame. This is a God-inspired love song! So I suggest we start some new traditions. Let’s write songs about the Song. Let’s sing those songs at Christian weddings. Let’s sing them during the reception. Let’s sing them as the couple is whisked away to their honeymoon. Let’s follow them to the hotel and serenade them for seven days! This is a song!

Furthermore, when you think *song* you must think *poem* or *lyric poetry*. “This is a song” is the same as saying, “This is a poem set to music.” This is obvious everywhere,<sup>10</sup> even in the first verse. Our song begins with a poetic device called consonance: “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.” Do you hear the repeated *s* sound in the initial consonants: Song . . . Songs . . . Solomon. In Hebrew, a similar *sh* sound is heard: shir hashhirim asher lishlomoh.<sup>11</sup>

Herein the potential danger lies. We can read and teach the Song, forgetting or neglecting its poetry and quickly run from alliterations to applications. The cry for practical propositions beckons the preacher. It is important that we learn real-life lessons from each poetic pericope. But it is likewise important (nay, necessary) to first understand and feel the power and play of words,

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what only poetry can do to the human heart and imagination. For there is a difference between saying,

She walks in beauty, like the night  
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;  
And all that's best of dark and bright  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.  
Thus mellowed to that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.<sup>12</sup>

and saying,

A woman in a black dress with shiny beads looked pretty when she walked by.

There's a difference between saying,

Pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold,  
Pease porridge in the pot, nine days old;  
Some like it hot, some like it cold,  
Some like it in the pot, nine days old.

and saying,

If the pea pudding has been in the pot for nine days, no thanks, I'll pass.<sup>13</sup>

If you turn that simple nursery rhyme into a statement, it loses its punch. Take the poetic structure out—8 syllables, 9 syllables, 8 syllables, 9 syllables—the poetic devices—alliteration (the *p*-words), assonance (the *o*-sound), and the rhyme scheme (hot/pot . . . cold/old)—and you take away the point of the poem: to make you laugh.

The Song of Songs is a song. Thus, as we study each poetic section, I will ask, what is the poetry doing? And together we will try to feel the poetry before we act upon its message.<sup>14</sup> I'll ask you, in a sense (and with your senses), to *smell* the myrrh, frankincense, and aloes, to *touch* the polished ivory, to *taste* the wine and apples, to *hear* the flowing streams, to *see* the gazelles leaping over the mountains . . . yes, to feel the flashes of fire, the very flame of the Lord.

Guidepost Two: . . . a Song about Human Love

That's the first guidepost: this is a song. Here's the second guidepost: this is a song *about human love set in the context of marriage*.

I'll deal with the second part of that sentence first. I've already said that this is a wedding song (also called an epithalamium), but let me now defend that claim. We know it's a wedding song from the cultural context—the sexual revolution of the 1960s hadn't yet reached Jerusalem in 960 B.C. In that place and time, there were only two kinds of love: truly free love between a man and a woman in marriage, and sexual slavery, which is found in adultery and fornication.<sup>15</sup>

So we know this is a wedding song from the cultural context (i.e., in Israel only sex within marriage was celebrated), but also from the language of the Song itself. After the word “wedding” is used in 3:11 (as the wedding day of Solomon is used as a foil), the word “bride” is used of the young woman six times in the next seventeen verses, in chapters 4 and 5. This is the heart of the Song, the section that undoubtedly describes sexual relations.<sup>16</sup> Further support for this marriage-song thesis is found in the language of a permanent pledge, such as “set me as a seal upon your heart” (8:6) or “my beloved is mine, and I am his” (2:16a; cf. 7:5; 8:4).<sup>17</sup>

Thus this is a wedding song that is naturally about what weddings celebrate—*human love*. On the back cover of Tom Gledhill's excellent commentary we read these words:

At first reading the Song of Songs appears to be an unabashed celebration of the deeply rooted urges of physical attraction, mutual love and sexual consummation between a man and a woman. Tom Gledhill maintains that the Song of Songs is in fact just that—a literary, poetic exploration of human love that strongly affirms loyalty, beauty and sexuality in all their variety.

If you didn't know and weren't influenced by the history of the interpretation of the Song and simply read the Song as is, you would likely surmise—with phrases like “kiss me,” “his right hand embraces me,” “your two breasts are like two fawns,” and so on—that this is *erotic* poetry set within the *ethical* limits of the marriage bed.<sup>18</sup> However, the near consensus of both Jewish and Christian interpretation for at least 1,600 years was that the Song of Songs is not about human love (at all), but divine love. That is, it sings of God's love for Israel and/or Christ's love for the Church or the individual Christian soul.

The reason for this seems to be the presupposition that human sexual love is an inappropriate topic for Scripture. Nicholas of Lyra (1270–1349) could speak of the love between a bride and groom as “proper” but not the proper subject of Scripture and thus not of this Song. Such fleshly love even within marriage has, in his words, “a certain dishonorable and improper quality

about it.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Theodoret of Cyrus (c. 393–c. 457) wrote that those who give the Song a “corporeal [fleshly] interpretation” have committed an “awful blasphemy.”<sup>20</sup>

This explains why—from Origen of Alexandria to Charles Spurgeon of London, from the medieval mystics to the American Puritans—Christians allegorized every jot and tittle of the Song, each thigh and breast and kiss and consummation. For example, one commentator said that the phrase “while the king was on his couch” (1:12) referred to “the gestation period of Christ in the womb of Mary,” and the “sachet of myrrh that lies between [the bride’s] breasts” (1:13) symbolizes “Christ in the soul of the believer, who lies between the great commands to love God and one’s neighbor.”<sup>21</sup> Those allegories are orthodox (and certainly Christ centered and thus edifying), but they are also exegetically absurd<sup>22</sup> and potentially theologically dangerous.

It is dangerous when Christian commentators, theologians, and pastors think there is a radical dichotomy between the sacred and the secular—praying is sacred; kissing is secular. When we believe that sexuality is the antithesis of spirituality, and that there is a great chasm between *eros* and *agape*,<sup>23</sup> we are in danger of losing not only our witness to the world—“What? Your religion has nothing to say about sex except that it is bad?”<sup>24</sup>—but also vital tenets of the Christian faith—the incarnation (John 1:1, 14), the bodily resurrection (1 Corinthians 6:12–20; 15), and the new heavens and new earth (2 Peter 3:13).

Following Marvin Pope’s analogy, I liken the history of interpretation to Hans Christian Andersen’s children’s tale *The Emperor’s New Clothes*.<sup>25</sup> Just as the emperor’s ministers and subjects affirmed that he was indeed wearing clothes (when he was not), interpreters kept telling themselves and their readers that the Song is solely about spiritual love (when it’s not). But just as a child saw the reality of the situation—the emperor is naked!—so do we see that the characters in the Song are naked. They are naked and unashamed. And today we should share their lack of shame. For the Song is a song that Adam could have sung in the garden when Eve arose miraculously from his side; and it remains a song that we can and should sing in the bedroom, the church, and the marketplace of ideas.

Don’t get me wrong here. Its lyrics about tasting and touching are “candid but not crude.”<sup>26</sup> They are not prudish, but neither are they immodest. Thus, they are far removed from the sexual anarchy and idiocy of our Top 40 music, as well as the crass love poetry of the ancient Near East. The Song has this beautiful balance: it has adult content, but it is adolescent appropriate. It is not X-rated; it is rated PG—parental (and pastoral) guidance recom-



mended. This Song guides us to see with Scriptural sensibilities that the earth is crammed with Heaven,<sup>27</sup> that the way of a man with a woman is “too wonderful” (Proverbs 30:18, 19), and that marriage is not simply a concession to the necessity of procreation but an affirmation of the beauty, chastity, and sacredness of human love. Amen and amen.

This is a song about human love set in the context of marriage. There you have it. I’ve pounded that second (sadly necessary) guidepost into place.

### Guidepost Three: . . . Found in the Bible

With our second guidepost in place, let me quickly add the third lest we get off course. Just because I think this Song is about human love does not mean I think a-theologically about it, that it has nothing to say about God’s love for us or our love for God.

This is not an English poem scribbled on the New York City subway. It is a Hebrew poem, and there is no Hebrew literature of this era that is non-religious. The Song is constructed of imagery that borrows heavily from the rest of the Old Testament. For example, when we read the garden imagery in 4:12—5:1, it’s right and natural for us to think of Eden; or when we read about the theme of intoxicating love in 1:2, the command of Proverbs 5:19 to be “intoxicated always in her [a wife’s] love” ought to come to mind. This Song of Scripture is saturated with other Scriptural language.

The Song of Songs uses Hebrew words, Hebrew names, Hebrew places, and Hebrew poetic devices *and* has a Hebrew author—“The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (1:1). That last word—“Solomon’s”—sets this Song within a historical and theological context. So here’s the third guidepost: This is a song about human love set in the context of marriage that is *found in the Bible*. What I mean is that the Song of Songs cannot be read properly if it is read outside of its canonical context. We must read its positive marriage imagery in contrast to Israel’s unfaithfulness as depicted in the prophets—that while God rejoices over his people as “the bridegroom rejoices over the bride” (Isaiah 62:5), Israel spoils the honeymoon with her spiritual promiscuity and adultery: see the story of Hosea, and read the forthright language of Ezekiel (16:7, 8), Jeremiah (2:2, 19, 20), and Isaiah (54:5–8). And whether we think there are no allusions or a thousand allusions to the Song in the New Testament,<sup>28</sup> we must read it in light of the person and work of Jesus, the very compass of the Christian canon, the one whom John the Baptist calls “the bridegroom” (John 3:29; cf. Matthew 9:14, 15) and Paul our “one husband” (2 Corinthians 11:2), the one whose kingdom and consummation is like a wedding feast (Matthew 22:2; Revelation 19:7).

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The Song is a song about human love set in the context of marriage that is *found in the Bible*, and the Bible has as its ultimate reference point Jesus—his birth, life, teachings, miracles, sufferings, death, resurrection, ascension, mediation, and return.

Perhaps an illustration will help you see what I'm saying. If you were to read C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, and you didn't know that Lewis was a Christian and used Christian symbolism and parts of the plot of the Bible, then you might never see Aslan, who dies and rises and rules, as a Christ-figure. You might just think he's a lion who talks, a neat character in a nice children's tale. But those who know something about the author and his intentions see more of what he wanted his readers to see—the story beneath the story. You see, the story of Jesus opens our eyes to the subtle details of those Narnian adventures.

Similarly, knowing the story of Jesus opens our eyes to the story of the Song. The love celebrated here has as its source and ultimate illustration Jesus Christ; the loyalty, beauty, and intimacy of human love depicted in this Song point to "that Love that undergirds all of reality and in whose Presence alone all longing can be satisfied."<sup>29</sup>

Therefore, with this third guidepost in place, throughout these studies I will seek, without exaggerating analogies, to be exegetically accurate, thoroughly canonical, and thus "boldly Christological."<sup>30</sup> For I assure you that literary merit and guileless veneration of human sexuality are not the reasons you find love's soft and idyllic voice between Ecclesiastes and Isaiah.

### Guidepost Four: . . . Written to Give Us Wisdom

Our fourth and final guidepost is about wisdom. This is a song (guidepost one) about human love (guidepost two) found in the Bible (guidepost three) *written to give us wisdom* (guidepost four).

I say "wisdom" because we can rightly categorize the Song of Songs as Wisdom Literature, thus fitting in with the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes. The most obvious reason I say this is because of 1:1, which reads, "The Song of Songs, which is Solomon's." This is Solomon, the king of Israel, but also the wisest of men, the supreme sage of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible.

In the Christian canon, the order goes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Proverbs begins, "The proverbs of Solomon, son of David, king of Israel" (1:1).<sup>31</sup> Ecclesiastes begins, "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (1:1) = Solomon?<sup>32</sup> Finally, the Song of

Songs starts, “The Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s” (1:1). Now, the part translated “which is Solomon’s” could indicate:

Dedication: to or for Solomon  
 Subject matter: about Solomon  
 Affinity: in the Solomonic literary tradition  
 Authorship: by Solomon<sup>33</sup>

I take the traditional view,<sup>34</sup> the most natural linguistic view,<sup>35</sup> that Solomon was the author.<sup>36</sup> I take this Song as one of Solomon’s 1,005 songs (see 1 Kings 4:32). As the superlative superscription states, the “song of (all) the songs,”<sup>37</sup> it is the very best of all of his prolific songwriting labors.<sup>38</sup>

I also side with the medieval Jewish scholar Rashi that Solomon wrote this Song not in his youth but in his old age<sup>39</sup> and that he did so as an act of contrition. In other words, in view of his idolatrous, polygamous relationships that led his heart away from the Lord (1 Kings 1–11) and away from sexual purity and marital intimacy (it’s hard to be truly intimate with 700 wives), he sets himself up as the foil in this Song (as we shall see),<sup>40</sup> and thus he writes this greatest of his songs in a distant “self-deprecating tone”<sup>41</sup> to say to his first readers and to us, “Listen, on this matter of marriage, do as I say, not as I did.”<sup>42</sup> Put differently, he says, “Don’t emulate my love life. Emulate theirs—this imaginary (or real?) couple. Emulate their simple, monogamous, faithful, passionate love for each other.”<sup>43</sup>

That’s what I think. But whether you hold this particular view or not,<sup>44</sup> you ought to hold the view that the Song is part of the wisdom corpus,<sup>45</sup> based partly on its association with Solomon, but also on the *wisdom admonition* that functions as a kind of refrain throughout the Song: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem . . . [do] not stir up or awaken love until it pleases.” That refrain is first found in 2:7 and then also in 3:5 and 8:4.

Besides that wisdom admonition, there is another subtle refrain, what I call a *wisdom admission*: “My beloved is mine, and I am his” which is found in various forms in 2:16, 6:3, and 7:10. These two refrains function as a double-sided, serrated key that helps unlock the front door of the Song. They are that important! They are important because they highlight that this is a unified poem, not a collection of random poems pasted together, and because they direct us to the wisdom that Solomon seeks to give to two different groups: the married and the unmarried.

The primary target audience is the unmarried, specifically single young women, “the daughters of Jerusalem.” Thrice the refrain begins, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem.”

These “daughters” are the “virgins” mentioned in 1:3 or “the young women” in 2:2.<sup>46</sup> They might be viewed as “bridesmaids,”<sup>47</sup> but they certainly should be understood as young Israelite women (of Jerusalem—Israel’s city girls and “local lasses”).<sup>48</sup> It addresses women of marriageable age,<sup>49</sup> whose bodies are ripe for sexual love (ages ten to fifteen),<sup>50</sup> who desire marital intimacy but are still unmarried.<sup>51</sup>

These girls are admonished to wait for sexual intimacy. Their bodies are saying “yes.” Their instincts for intimacy are saying “yes.” Their suitors might even be saying “yes” (or at least “please”). But they are admonished to say “no.” The wisdom message to these young women is to wait. Virgins, stay virgins . . . not forever, but for now. Wait for marriage. That’s wisdom. That’s the simple wisdom offered in this complex book.

Now notice how Solomon artistically does this. The admonition does not come through the voice of a celibate prophet, a learned rabbi, a stern sage, or even a father or mother (as is common in the Wisdom Literature), but through the voice of a newlywed—the bride, a former daughter of Jerusalem herself, one of their peers. This is a book about peer pressure at its Biblical best! Yes, the protagonist in this poem is a young bride.<sup>52</sup> And this newly married woman comes out of her wedding chamber, love scene after love scene (as we shall see), to tell the young ladies, “Wait for this—what I’m enjoying. Wait for this—it’s worth it. Cool your passions now, and arouse them later, when it’s time.” You see, the daughters of Jerusalem who hover around this “poetic drama” (they seem never to leave the scene) are the key to understanding the purpose of this whole wisdom poem.<sup>53</sup>

Let me make this as clear as possible. I’ll set this in the context of the Wisdom Literature. The book of Proverbs can be called “a book for boys.” The word “son” is used over forty times; the word “daughter” is never used. “My son, stay away from that kind of girl, and don’t marry this kind of girl. But marry and save yourself for that girl—Proverbs 31:10–31.” That’s how the book ends, quite intentionally, for Proverbs is a book for boys. The Song of Songs is a book for girls. And its message to girls is, “patience then passion” or “uncompromised purity now; unquenchable passion then.” I’ll put it this way: In Proverbs the young lad is told to take a cold shower. In the Song of Songs the young lassie is told to take a cold shower.

However, also in the Song of Songs the married couples (children, close your eyes now)—the newlyweds and not so newlyweds—are told to take a warm shower . . . together. I mean it. God’s Word means it. The shower part is optional; the passion part is not. There are two refrains to the Song: one is to the unmarried (young women especially, but also young men); the other

is to the married. That second refrain goes like this: “My beloved is mine, and I am his.” This addresses mutual compatibility, absolute intimacy—two becoming one.

In an indirect and impressionistic manner, this second wisdom admonition functions as an invitation to intimacy. In Titus 2:3, 4 Paul instructs the older women to “train the young women to love their husbands.” Here in the Song, the young woman (the bride) trains the older women to love their husbands. That is, the Song is a like a splash of cold water that some of us old lovers need thrown on our faces. Or, to change metaphors and mix a few from the Song itself, it’s like the wind that rekindles a flame that is dying out: “Awake, O north wind . . . come, O south wind! Blow . . .” (4:16)—blow this fizzling spark into an undying flame.

So, the Song asks the Christian couple: How’s your love life? Is your wedding bed dead or alive? Is it as cold as a frozen pond in February or as hot as the Florida sand in August? You see, reading, studying, listening to, and feeling the Song of Songs is like attending a wedding and witnessing the ripeness and rightness of young love. This Song is God’s provision to sustain loving marriages and renew loveless ones. It is his provision for increased intimacy that reflects the intimacy of Christ’s love for the Church, an intimacy that makes the world turn its head to view our marriages and say, “So, that’s the gospel. I see it now. Your love—God’s love. I get it. What must I do to be made *wise* unto salvation? What must I do to share in that intimacy?”

The Song was written to give us wisdom: to the unmarried, the wisdom to wait; to the married, the wisdom to warm up to each other again . . . and again and again.

### My Summary in Sum

We have begun our journey through this difficult book. And as your guide I have put down four guideposts:

1. This is a song
2. About human love
3. Found in the Bible
4. Written to give us wisdom.

Now, I won’t ask you yet, “Understandest thou what thou readest?” But I do hope that each step of the way, study after study, your vision of Solomon’s Song becomes clearer and clearer.

So, on we journey.





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